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CLAY FIGURES FOUND IN GUATEMALA

BY P. J. J. VALENTINI

The last Quarterly of Publications of the Royal Ethnologic Museum, Berlin, volume iv, 1, contains the result of certain explorations made by Dr Ch. Lapper in the Central American provinces of Chiapas and Guatemala. The traveler calls attention to the vast amount of hitherto unknown Indian settlements lying in ruins on that ancient culture-ground. Although devoid of the architectural grandeur and the sculptural finish exhibited in the palatial ruins of Chichen Itza, Copan, and Palenque, the author says that they nevertheless must not be overlooked by future explorers. At the slightest scraping of the surface they yielded a crop of interesting relics, principally of pottery, and when viewed as a whole they revealed the fact that in culture the people seem not to have been so absolutely dependent on those larger centers as was believed; for each of the now collapsed group of structures still exhibits that main feature of worship, the sacrificial tumulus with its platform on top and steep staircases subtending often an angle of eighty degrees. In plan, however, the construction appears to conform to their more sumptuous models, the precincts and the oblong edifices enclosing inner yards, and these yards lying deeper than the common level. Dr Lapper found no mortar employed either in the slabs that covered the tumuli or in such walls as were built to fortify the places and to make them inaccessible to the enemy. The explorer cites not less than seventy-one of such places, extending from central Chiapas to the confines of Honduras and Guatemala. They are shown on a chart, and views and measurements of twenty of them also illustrate the text. Those shown on plan 20, representing the ruins of Socabaja (department of Quiche, Guatemala), are reported by Dr Lapper as of larger extent and of more interest than all the others he succeeded in exploring.

One part of the pottery collected on this tour was presented by the explorer to the Berlin Ethnologic Museum, and carefully described and commented upon by Dr Ed. Seler, the curator of

the American department, in sequence to Dr Lapper's article, pages 21-53. Dr Seler's text, as usual, is full of additional historical information and of suggestive generalizations, proving again how much he is at home in a district more than three thousand miles distant from his own.

Among the one hundred and four illustrations given three attracted our special attention. They represent figures of clay, pertaining to the Sarg collection, which was made on the ground explored by Dr Lapper, and which are quoted for the purpose of certain comparisons. We regret that Dr Seler should not have dwelt a little longer on these curious specimens; possibly he abstained because they have been discussed elsewhere, a fact, however, which has not come to our knowledge. We reproduce those specimens in Figs. I, II, and III, adding thereto a few remarks.

Although the specimens were acquired in Cobán (Verapaz), we doubt if they were the product of the tribe of Indians living in this department. They seem to us to be imported. They are of an execution too nice, too individual, quite too artistic, and deviate too much from the conventional pattern exhibited in the pottery manufactured by the Indians of the Guatemala-Altos to be modeled by their hands. Judging from the features of Fig. III, it is evident that this head is not that of an Indian; it shows neither the characteristics of prominent cheek-bones nor the usual decoration of plumed head-dress and earrings. We believe it to be the portrait of a Spaniard—the faithful reproduction of the visage of one of those stern and haughty "capitanes" who mercilessly made themselves masters of person and property and rulers of the soil



Figure I.

they trod. We notice the characteristics of the short-cropped hair, the deep-cut folds above the nose, which is strong but sharply modeled; the energetic mouth, whose upper lip is covered with a moustache trimmed by scissors, and which, in expectation of his "portrait being taken," seems carefully waxed and trimmed at both ends.

We do not venture to state from what part of conquered Central America this image of one of the Castilian "bravoes" has found its way to Coban, where it was obtained by Mr Sarg. What we wish to emphasize is that this head cannot possibly be viewed as belonging to the indigenous race, and can hardly have been manufactured on the place or neighborhood where it was obtained. It may be remembered, in this connection, that by

solemn contract made with the chieftains of the Verapaz, white men, save the few missionaries appointed by the bishop of Guatemala to convert the natives, were forbidden to visit this province. It is but thirty years since that the Indians of the Verapaz have permitted white men to settle among them.

As regards Figs. I and II we also think these clay relics must be considered as being imported to the Verapaz; there is no doubt, however, that they represent specimens of an

Indian race. This fact is plainly warranted at first sight by the peculiar cut of the hair, the pearl string around the neck, the scanty shirt, and the large ear-plates. That the latter are square and not round, as they are usually represented throughout Mexico and the whole of Central America, in sculpture as well as in painting, is a fact so exceptional that it must strike the eye of every student conversant with the matter.

The clay figure (I) shows a plump little woman sustaining the weight of a large water vessel on her shoulders. We imagine her having gone down to the brook to fill it, and that trying to lift the heavy vessel she found the task to be too hard for her. So she broke down, musing what to do with her own self and what with that vexatious burden. Her helplessness is marvelously well



Figure II.

expressed, and must have been caught in the act itself by the watchful eye of one of the tribal artists, who really executed a little masterpiece when he made her leer angrily toward the cruel foe that keeps her pressed to the ground, and at the same time contrasted her feeling of despair with that of self-ridicule, expressed in the laughter of the upturned lips. This highest apex of art—to depict in the position of the body, and in the facial lineaments any predominant or mixed feeling, such as would stir the muscles of the human face under the impulse of a certain momentary impression—is never seen in any product of Indian hand from Puget sound down to Patagonia. The only exception we know of is that of the Chiriquian potter-artist. Through his work in this line, as shown in excavated specimens, we feel almost compelled to say that the Chiriquian Indian shows himself the only one of the many races of the whole continent who knew mirth and merriment, and who did not deem it beneath his dignity to reproduce these sentiments in his much-beloved clay. Now, we are far from venturing the conjecture that our little statuette was imported from the Isthmian straits to the Altos of Guatemala. What we conjecture is only this: that it was the product of the hands and of the mirthful bent of mind of those Chiriquian invaders, of whom we read in Burgoa that they had come sailing in canoes from Nicaragua and farther south to land in Tehuantepec, taking possession of the islands and waging a long war against the Zapotecas, by whom they finally were absorbed. The same way, we know, had also come the Mangues, only that this tribe succeeded in taking permanent hold of Chiapas. Therefore it would not be preposterous to assume that some families of those straggling *Wabi*, as they were called by the Zapoteca, or *Cueva* and *Coiba*, as the Isthmian Conquistadores called them, had kept up their independence as well as their hereditary talent in the country of their adoption. The Chiriquians we know of wore no square ear-plates or any ear-dress at all, but, having settled among the gorgeous Zapoteca, they may have adopted the fashion, only that they chose or were forced, for the sake of



Figure III.

individuality, to shape them otherwise; also the straight forehead, the rounded fat face, and the full sensual lips (Fig. III) speak of a race distinct from that among which they had come to live.

We leave it to the expert to refute or confirm the conjectures we have hazarded concerning these clay figures from Coban.
